

“Belfast”

God at the Movies 2022: Pt.1

[Trailer 1:56]

Our film this morning was nominated for 7 Academy Awards this year and won one – Best Original Screenplay. And it was very deserving that Kenneth Branagh received that Oscar, because he was not only the writer *and* the director *and* the producer, but also the *subject* of the film! *Belfast* is the romantic cinematic memoir of his childhood in the turbulent Northern Ireland city.

The family at it's center my have health issues, money worries and an outdoor toilet – but this is no hopeless tragedy. Seen through the eyes of 9-year-old Buddy – who is absolutely fantastic – it's a bitter sweet look at the destruction of an idyll. But a look that focuses as much or more on the idyll as on it's destruction. Yes, it's about the birth of terrorism in a nation, but it's just as much about how do you get the girl in your class to like you.

The opening scene is a vibrant one of neighborhood children at play that makes us nostalgic for a childhood that most of us in this room – but not *all* of us - are too young to have had anyway. And in a moment, everything turns around. Let's take a look at that early scene and notice how everyone watches out for Buddy. [Riot 1:09]

The child's toy becomes an actual shield – what a metaphor. In the summer and fall of 1969, everything changed, not just for Buddy's neighborhood, but the whole town, nation and Empire. It would last officially for 30 years and come to be know as “The Troubles”. Sectarian guerrilla warfare between Catholic Nationalists and Protestant Unionists in Northern Ireland that would result in more than 3,500 deaths, over half of them civilians. Another 32% of the dead were members of the legitimate British military forces, and 16% were members of the paramilitary groups – some would call them “terrorists” – who were responsible for 90% of the murders.

Now, I am a historically minded person, so when I see a historical movie, it always makes me want to do some more digging – I want to understand the broader story. And as the credits rolled on this wonderful film I realized I did not understand enough about The Troubles – even though almost all of it happened in my lifetime. For instance, as an American Protestant, I was led to believe that the villains of the story were the IRA – the Irish Republican Army – prominent bad guys in both Tom Clancy novels and on CNN. It turns out that the story is much more complex than the one-sided tale that most people were told.

So to understand this film, you have to understand the Troubles, which means you have to understand something about Irish history – so strap in! If a history lesson is not your thing, just play Wordle on your phone for the next 8 minutes and then rejoin us for the theology part. But as I began to search the British history books on my shelves, I quickly realized that I couldn't understand what happened in Ireland in the 1960's without understanding what happened in the 1920's. And *that* doesn't make sense without knowing what happened in 1800 and that all rests on what happened in the 1600's and you can't understand *that* without taking a look at the bleeding 12th Century! And actually you can argue that's not even far enough. So as I said, strap in.

Geography has decreed that Ireland's head almost nestles on Scotland's shoulder, being separated by only twelve miles of water at the narrowest link. To put that in perspective, from the Florida Keys to Cuba is 93 miles and we all know the geo-political struggle that has resulted from that near neighbor. Well that's nothing compared to the tensions that have plagued the two islands in the North Sea called Britain and Ireland.

By the way quick geography lesson – the island of Great Britain contains three nations – England, Scotland and Wales. So it's ok to call all of their inhabitants “British” – because they're on the island – but do not call a Welshman or a Scott, “English” unless you are itching to get your nose punched. And that is *doubly* true for the Irish – “Dublin true” you might say!

Fifty-five years *before* the birth of Jesus, Julius Caesar lead the Roman Army in an invasion of Britain. And they stayed for the next 367 years. Again, for the Americans, we won't even be a nation that long until 2143. But because of the incredibly foreboding terrain, the Romans never invaded Ireland, so unlike their neighbors, they were not as influenced by Roman law and customs. This would lead especially to a big difference in religion.

Anglo-Saxon monks from the big island inspired, by the teachings of Rome, had led a charge against Gaelic paganism on the smaller island. Even when Christianity was adopted there were many marked incompatibilities between the Celtic and Latin churches. I always found it interesting that Irish and Italian immigrants would always hate each other when they came to this country – even though they were both Catholic.

There's a humorous clip in the film that points out how so many of our views of other Christian sects are pretty ignorant. As Jesus said, we tend to avoid the plank in our own eye when we point out the speck in others. So Buddy is getting ready to go his church – Protestant church – but he has some questions about the Catholics that his father try's to answer. Let's take a look.

[**Church :38**]. But sure, *theirs* is the religion of fear!

Well, back to the history – are we even sure this is still *church*? - the Norman invasion of 1169 is generally regarded by the Irish as the starting point for “eight hundred years of British oppression.” English King Henry II used innovative methods of warfare, including chain mail, the use of calvary and the building of castles to devastate the lightly armed Irish foot soldiers. And for the first time the King of England considered himself the King of Ireland. But everyone did not live happily ever after.

One historian says, “Though Ireland lay too close to England for independence, unlike other Celtic regions of Wales and Scotland, she lay just too far away for complete conquest.” (Coogan, 4). This meant there would be turmoil of one kind or another for centuries. The Irish normally came off second best in set-piece military encounters but did far better when they used the tactic of employing the bogs and forests to harass and hide - a tradition of guerrilla warfare entered Irish folklore that would emerge fully in the 20th century.

The 16th Century Protestant Reformation gave a new religious twist to the pursuit of British imperial aims. King James I pro-Protestant policies upped the tension. He gave his Protestant Lords land rights to Irish plantations, but most of them failed because it's hard to keep a native people basically enslaved, especially when the landlords are mostly across the seas.

But a handful of the plantations succeeded – very well in fact. They were in the north-eastern part of the island and would make up the six counties that would come to be called the Ulster region – that's important. The reason why they succeeded, is because they were worked *not* by Irish natives, but by immigrants. The settling of large numbers of English Presbyterians and Scottish Presbyterians - including Deanna's McCulloch ancestors - in what is today Northern Ireland. Their descendants still live in that area and are keenly aware of the dangers, real or imagined, posed by their Catholic neighbors.

During the religious wars of the 1640's the threat was very real as Catholic natives massacred the Protestant immigrants until William of Orange, in his glistening suit of armor, astride a white charger, sword aloft led the English Protestant invading army to victory on July 1, 1690 at the Battle of Boyne. This is the enduring icon of the “Orangemen” in Northern Ireland to this day.

Every July in Northern Ireland is “marching season” when these proud Protestants have parades through Catholic neighborhoods to remember the victory – and restate their supposed superiority. It remains very controversial. Imagine confederate statues times a thousand. In fact, I'll give you a heads up, if you should find yourself in Belfast these days and you're a Longhorn fan - as I am - best we not wear our beloved orange lest we spark an international incident!

But here's what I want you to understand, the true history was much more – is *still* much more - complicated than just Protestant vs. Catholic. I would urge all of us - mostly Protestants - not to fall into the trap of “well these people are on *our* side.” The truth is William was fighting for his English crown against rival James II as part of the wider European religious wars that followed the Reformation. A campaign in which the Pope was opposed to the French king - Catholic Louis XIV - and supported by a coalition that included William of Orange. So the Vatican supported Protestant William, not Catholic James. When the Pope learned of William's victory over the Irish Catholics he ordered a special High Mass to be celebrated in Rome! So it's a lot more about politics than religion. And when religion gets mixed up in politics, believe me, all hell breaks loose.

But on the ground in Ireland, the Catholics were very much the losers. William sailed back to his London throne leaving the settlement of the peace in the hands of the victorious Protestant settlers who had fought beside him. To them the term “Catholic” equaled “treacherous” and they interpreted the king's treaty as a mean of Protestant domination.

Penal laws were set in place to make it impossible for Catholics to own property, receive an education or enter the professions without first renouncing their religion. These laws existed in England as well, but there it was just about religion. In Ireland it was a way to subjugate not just a rival religion but a - from the English perspective - inferior race. Edmund Burke, the famous British Member of Parliament described the penal code as “A machine as well fitted for the oppression, impoverishment and degradation of a people, and the debasement in them of human nature itself, as ever proceeded from the perverted ingenuity of man.”

Fast forward, The Act of Union of 1800 creates the United Kingdom and brought control of Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England under the Parliament in London. This would last 100 years. Money and culture now left Dublin for London leaving poverty, infrastructure decay and absentee landlordism in its wake. One of the results of which was an attempt to maximize farming yields with an over-reliance on the potato that led to the great famine of 1840.

This economic and ecological disaster sent a million Irish to the grave and a million more to emigrate out of the country - including the largest diaspora of them fleeing to *our* shores and bringing anti-British sentiments that are still felt from the pubs of Boston's North Shore to the bars of the Bronx. Irish-Americans are a continued source of financial support for the IRA to this day - but we're getting ahead of ourselves.

Like so many nations – including our own – Ireland's north became industrial and the south more agrarian. This drew lots of Catholics to Belfast to work in the shipyards – where they built the Titanic - and textile mills. They had their ghetto neighborhoods. Falls Road in the west was Catholic and its eastern counterpart Shankill Road was Protestant. And there were the mixed neighborhoods in the middle - like where Buddy and his family lived.

At the turn of the 20th century the issue of Home Rule became prominent. The Irish said, “this is our home and we want to rule it from Dublin, not from England.” You’ll recall something similar on *these* shores in 1776. But just like you had British sympathizers in the America War for Independence – Torries – you had pro-British (or pro-Union) sentiments in Ireland. Especially in the north.

In 1912 the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) was created by 100,000 northern Ireland Protestants who pledged to stand against Home Rule by force if necessary. This would be the violent counterpart to the Catholic Irish Republican Army – the IRA - in the south. Unionists/Loyalists vs Nationalists. Orange vs Green. The move for independence came to a head in 1916, and as they had in the Boston Massacre, the British forces overacted and created martyrs.

The Government of Ireland Act of 1920 partitioned Ireland into the Protestant Unionist Northern Ireland with a parliament in Belfast and the South and Southwestern Catholic counties became the Irish Free State headquartered in Dublin, or as it has come to be known today the Republic of Ireland. So back to our geography lesson – The United Kingdom today is made up of 4 nations – England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. And the Republic of Ireland is her own free country.

And by the way, after Brexit, she is the only English speaking nation in the European Union and multi-national companies are moving their regional headquarters to Dublin (and leaving London) at a very rapid rate. Choices have consequences.

Anyway, for the last half of the 20th century, if you were a Protestant living in the South, you were going to be persecuted. You would know you were “the other”; the jobs and houses and best schools would be going to your Catholic neighbors. But if you were a Catholic living in the North, it would be just the opposite. The nature of religion is to create the “other”. That’s why I’m with the famous Irishman, Bono, who said, “Religion is what happens when God leaves the building.”

And before I get accused of both-sides-ing the argument, we must admit that the persecution was much more severe in the north. The way the Protestants treated the Catholics in the Ulster counties can be directly likened to the apartheid in South Africa. All of those are the fault of Empire by the way. I’ve preached on it in more detail before, but the long and the short of it is, God hates empires - loves *nations*, hates empires.

So, you’ve got two sets of Christians killing each other. But again, it’s not really about faith. That is a cover-story. None of these people who were doing the violence were purely disciples of Jesus. You get a great picture of this in our film. Buddy’s father is being pressured by the neighborhood bully into joining up with the Protestant militia to try and force out their Catholic neighbors. But Pa – Buddy is the only one in the family who gets a proper name – sees right through his rival as he refuses. [**Gangster :32**]

“It’s time for *real* Protestants to stand up.” I’m going to tell you, first off, in a faith who’s founder said, (**Matthew 7:1**) “*Do not judge, or you too will be judged.*” We need to be really careful about throwing around pronouncements of who the “real Christians are”. Honestly, that’s a good policy for citizens as well. I noticed several years ago that a vice-presidential candidate started throwing around the language of “real Americans” and unfortunately we’ve seen that rhetoric stick.

That is always the language of authoritarianism. Ask Hitler who were the “real Germans”. Ask Stalin about the “true comrades”. Ask Chairman Mao about the “real people’s movement”. Same with the “you’re either for us or against us.” We can have differences of opinions in politics – strong ones even – but that kind of combative “enemy” language has no place in a free democracy. And it’s dangerous. One of the many lessons of *Belfast* is that words have consequences – oftentimes violent consequences.

But it’s even less seemly when we talk about “real Christians”. I find that most people that use that language are trying to control you. Make no mistake, it will be Jesus and Jesus alone who will finally separate the sheep from the goats and the wheat from the tares. And in The Troubles, most of the would be judges – specially the paramilitary groups – were in fact just a bunch of jumped up thugs that used the excuse of a religious conflict to carry out their crimes.

This was a real problem. In addition to the history books, I read a series of crime novels set during the Troubles. Sometimes fiction helps you capture nuance that non-fiction doesn't. So here's a passage in which an Irish policeman, named Yates, is explaining the Troubles to a visiting British detective. Listen to this:

“But it's all about history,” Yates said levelly. ‘On the surface at least. ‘And underneath?’ ‘Paramilitaries are in the business of making money. They can't exist without money. So now they've become gangsters, pure and simple, because that's the easy way to make the money they need. And then it becomes self-perpetuating.”

“The IRA and the UDA get together now and then and discuss things. They sit around a table together, just like the politicians want them to do, but instead of talking about peace they talk about carving up the country. You can extort from these taxi firms if we can extort from those building sites...It's like one of those mafia films, the money these bastards are making...’ Yates shook his head. ‘They can't afford peace. It would be bad for business.’” (*Mortal Causes*, 559)

Religion doesn't cause violence. The wickedness of the human heart causes violence. Take away religion – as they did in many Communist states in the last century – and you still have unbelievable violence of humans against humans. But...that's not meant to make excuses. Those of us who care about the faith, and the good name of our Savior, must take responsibility for when violence is done, or even threatened, in our name. We must stand up against it.

I am convinced that most things in the world are the Church's fault. If the Church would be the Church, it would be *attracting* people to Jesus instead of so often pushing them away. We can debate whether The Troubles were a legitimate Catholic-Protestant skirmish, or just politics masking behind faith. But it doesn't matter, it still gave the Church a bad witness in the world. Is it any wonder that church attendance rates are so low in Europe and Britain?

The Reformation was a good thing. The Church needed to be reformed. The Bible needed to be returned to the common people. But the dark side of its legacy is 100 years of brutal war across the continent of Europe. Catholics killed Protestants and the Protestants returned the favor. And all in the name of “who was the true servant of the Prince of Peace?”

Is it any wonder that some of the 18th century Enlightenment thinkers began to say, “Can we find a way to talk about things like love and beauty and virtue without bringing those divisive and dangerous concept of “god” into it?” Basically atheism was invented as a response to a bloody and destructive church. The ancient pagans weren't atheists – just the opposite, they believed in *lots* of gods. No, modern atheism was a reaction to the church wars. See what I mean about how so much of what's wrong in the world is the church's fault?

And again, I can't just say, "Well, *real* Christians would never do these things." No, I can say real Christians *shouldn't* do these things. But the evidence is hard to avoid. I want to read you a scripture that speaks to the issues we're discussing. And it involves some of the very founders of the Christian church.

If you have your Bibles you might want to turn with me to Luke chapter 9 – there's a lot going on in this pivotal chapter, but **Luke 9:51** marks a big shift in Luke's narrative, "*As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.*" Up until now, most of Jesus' ministry has taken place in the region of Galilee, in the backwater. But now he's going to shift to the big city, to Jerusalem. And this is of course going to lead to the culmination of his mission on the cross. So it's a big deal.

V.52-53, "*And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem.*" Ok, so they are a bit rude to Jesus. That's not nice. And there's a whole lot of racial baggage being carried in those sentences that we'll unpack in just a minute. But before we do, I want to show you that just a few verses earlier, Jesus had taught his disciples what to do when people reject you in ministry. This exact scenario.

Jesus said in **Luke 9:5**, "*If people do not welcome you, leave their town and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.*" So, you do your ministry thing, but if they reject you...fine, just brush it off and move on to the next town. So how well did the disciples learn that lesson? Well, let's look at their reaction to seeing Jesus be dissed on this occasion.

Luke 9:54, "*When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?"*". That's not shaking off the dust. That's mass murder! Now, it's easy to sometimes write off the disciples as bumbling idiots. It sometimes reads like Jesus and the Twelve Stooges. But just calling people idiots doesn't help us get to the root of the human condition.

So let's try to understand them. Instead of just saying, "What idiots," let's just try to understand them. First of all, you need to understand that the disciples would have been very familiar with the story of God sending fires of judgement. They weren't getting this idea from violent comic books. Twice in the Old Testament books of Kings, a prophet named Elijah called down fire from heaven and roasted his enemies. And Elijah was a *huge* Hebrew hero. Second among the prophets only to Moses.

Second thing you need to understand is the disciples...*just saw Elijah...and Moses!* What?! That's right. Also in Luke chapter 9, you have the story of the Transfiguration, where Jesus went up on a mountain to pray. And while he was there, the whole place starts glowing and Moses and Elijah show up! And three disciples witness this – including James and John, who are now on the trigger for the calling down of fire.

I don't have time to tell that story, but the message of the transfiguration was that Jesus was even greater than Moses and Elijah. So now think of the logic of the disciples. "You're even better than Elijah. Elijah called fire down on his enemies. These people have rejected you, and that's even worse than rejecting Elijah. Therefore, shall we not bring down fire and destroy them?"

But there is a third thing to understand about this passage. Where was all this taking place? It tells us; "a *Samaritan* village". Now, that is more significant than you probably realize. I was doing some research on the Samaritans this week and what I discovered absolutely shocked me. The parallels to our movie – at least to the historical troubles between northern Irish Catholics and Protestants – was astounding.

First of all, like Catholics and Protestants, Samaritans and Jews were two rather closely related religious communities. Very similar, albeit it with some significant theological differences. They weren't as *different* as Jews and Muslims for instance, but they weren't as *similar* as – let's say – Pharisees and Sadducees. That's just like Baptists and Presbyterians.

They both considered Abraham their spiritual father, but the Samaritan's had mixed blood-lines with some other races – thus the "pure blood" Jews considered them inferior. Always some racial nonsense going on. Both groups followed the Hebrew Scriptures, although the Samaritans only recognized the first five books – The Pentateuch or the Law.

And the biggest difference was, the Samaritans viewed Mt. Gerizim – which of course was in *their* territory - as the holiest mountain and thus rejected Mt. Zion which is what Jerusalem was built around. It is actually rather similar to how the Catholics see Rome as the most important city for their faith and Protestants say, "All cities matter!"

So the Samaritan's geographic territory sits in the north of Israel smack dab in between Galilee – where Jesus grew up and based his ministry out of – and Jerusalem – where Jesus was now heading to complete his ministry. It would take an extra three days for Galilean Jews to go around Samaria on their way to a Jerusalem festival. But most of them did.

And here is an historical reason why. The ancient historian Josephus recalls some great troubles that took place between these two religious sects. He says, “It was the custom of the Galileans when they came to the holy city at the festivals, to take their journeys through the country of the Samaritans.” (Josephus *Antiquities*, Bk 20/Ch. 6) What are they doing? They are marching. And where are they marching? Right through the settled territory of the neighbor who they looked down on. Does that sound familiar?

And just like in Northern Ireland, that’s provocative. What would happen if we got a bunch of Longhorns and decided to march across Kyle Field in College Station? You know *exactly* what would happen. Well, this particular year, a group in one village of Samaria along the parade route reached their last nerve. They’d had enough and so Josephus said they “fought with the Galileans and killed a great many of them.” They massacred the Jews along their parade route.

Well, the Galileans appealed to the Roman Governor in the area – Cumanus – to bring them justice in the matter. They wanted the men who had killed their friends and family punished. Can you see it’s like the Northern Irish factions reaching out to the British Empire to settle the dispute? And so what kind of justice do they get? Let me just read it to you from Josephus’ account: “But Cumanus was induced by the Samaritans, with money, to do nothing in the matter; upon which the Galileans were much displeased.”

Well, of course they were. When the scales of justice are crooked, you will have a broken society. And so the Galileans were furious and it says they “persuaded the multitude of the Jews to betake themselves to arms, and to regain their liberty.” And listen to this part – again, the parallels are fascinating – it says that Jewish leaders tried to talk these militias out of the violent revenge but they wouldn’t listen, “but took their weapons, and entreated the assistance of Eleazar, the son of Dineus, a robber, who had many years made his abode in the mountains, with which assistance they plundered many villages of the Samaritans.”

Hey, if we can get justice by legal means – if the powers of law and order are against us - we’ll turn to gangsters for help. Do you realize how many times this happens in history? This is *the* terrorist origin story. This is how the mafia started in Sicily. This is how the Taliban started in Afghanistan. “We’ll turn to the internal criminal element for relief from these outside oppressors.” Of course, eventually the criminals become more oppressive than the outside forces ever were. Paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland killed exponentially more people than the official armed forces of either England or Ireland.

And then of course, the Empire can't just turn a blind eye to vigilante justice – even if it was incompetent Imperial leadership that put the match to the gasoline – and so Cumanus took four regiments of Roman soldiers, armed Samaritan gangs and together they marched against the vigilante Jews and “slew many of them and took a great number of them alive.”

And thus the Romans created Jewish martyrs in the cause against the Samaritan martyrs who were reacting against the Galilean martyrs...do you see how complicated an “eye-for-an-eye” ethic gets you? Who are the “good guys”? Who are the “bad guys”? It's not so clear cut. Unless you just decide that “our guys” are always the heroes and “their guys” are always the villains. Which is what most of the human race does by default.

And so you see this is what Jesus' disciples – who weren't just Jewish, they were *Galileans!* – were doing with these rude Samaritans who *dared* disrespect their Messiah. Let's call down fire from heaven and roast them alive. Not even, “Let's use violence against them ourselves.” No, “Let's entreat God to do the violence on our behalf, because *obviously* He's on our side. We're the truth, justice and righteous side!”

So how does Jesus respond to this Jew vs. Gentile, Protestant vs. Catholic, (Republican vs. Democrat???) us vs. them request? I mean, there's an Old Testament precedent. There's historical bad blood. Even now, these people *had* acted rudely. So how does Jesus respond? Well, he doesn't mince words. **Luke 9:55-56**, “*But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then he and his disciples went to another village.*” Now, the Greek word there for “rebuke” is quite interesting. Not every time, but *a lot* of the time, when Jesus is rebuking *demonic* power, this is the word that Luke uses.

For instance, look at this exchange very early in Jesus' ministry. Jesus had just finished one of his first sermons, and as soon as he was done, the crazies come out. **Luke 4:33-35 ESV**, “*And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, 34 “Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.” 35 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent and come out of him!” And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm.*”

That's the same word for “rebuke” that Jesus uses in chapter nine for the disciples. I believe that is intentional. All through both his Gospel and Acts, Luke uses the supernatural to demonstrate the differences between God's Kingdom and the world's kingdom. Between the way of God and the way of the devil. And this is Luke's way – and more importantly it is Jesus' way – of telling us that all religious violence is demonic.

Notice the demon recognized Jesus as “the holy One of God” - you can know who Jesus is...and still be a tool of the devil. The disciples had made great sacrifices to drop everything to follow Jesus – you can follow Jesus...and still be a tool of the devil. Jesus said as much to Peter himself. “Get behind me, Satan!” My point is this, you can be a “real Christian”...and still be a tool of the devil. But you can’t be Christ-like and engage in the devils tools of violence and coercion.

Later, when his Jerusalem ministry is almost complete, in the Garden of Gethsemane, soldiers will come to arrest Jesus. To lead him away to an illegal trial, a miscarriage of justice. Does he call down fire and consume them? Does he result to violence in the name of his movement? Again his disciples do. One of them comes in swinging a sword and maims one of the soldiers.

And what does Jesus do? Once again he rebukes his side – “Put away your sword. Don’t you know that if you live by the sword you’ll die by the sword?” And then he heals the enemy soldier. Doesn’t really sound like “you’re either with us or you’re against us”, does it? He is the absolute un-Elijah. Can you imagine the perplexity, if he’s greater than Elijah?

Later on, the soldiers are pounding nails into his hands, into his feet, splintering the bones into the wood of the cross. What does he do? “Father, forgive them. They really don’t understand what they’re doing.” Why? Why is Jesus the un-Elijah? Why doesn’t fire come down on the Samaritans? Why doesn’t fire come down on the soldiers? Why? The answer is, just three chapters later, Jesus says something very strange. This is in **Luke 12:49**, “*I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!*”

That’s very interesting for a couple of reasons. One is fire in biblical imagery always means the judgment of God. Secondly, Jesus says he comes to *bring* fire on the earth. Well, again this is a little perplexing because, after all, he was just rejected. The disciples asked him to bring down the fire, the way Elijah did, and he doesn’t do it. Why not? I mean he *says* he comes to bring fire on the earth.

Keep reading. **Luke 12:50**, “*But I have a baptism to undergo, and what constraint I am under until it is completed!*” Now, wait a minute. Baptism? He has already been baptized with water. He’s talking about something else. “I have come to bring fire, how constrained I am until it’s completed. I have come to undergo a baptism, how crushed I am until it’s over.”

Do you know why the fire didn't come down on the Samaritans? Do you know why the fire didn't come down on the soldiers? Because the fire came down on *Jesus*. He was baptized - he was immersed - with the judgment of God. He got what we deserved. See, this is the answer to all the riddles.

You look back over the years, and you see, over and over again, when people want to atone for their sins and they need to be forgiven, they would take a sacrifice, put it on the altar, and burn it with fire. But there's something inside of us that says, intuitively, "That can't be enough to put away sins," and you are right.

All those fires were pointing to *this* fire, and the reason the soldiers got a healing touch instead of judgment, the reason the Samaritans...in the next chapter, Jesus is going to make them the heroes over the Jews. Their name may not even be known today if it weren't for the parable of the *Good Samaritan*. It didn't come down on the Samaritans; it didn't come down on the soldiers, because it came down into the heart of Jesus Christ. He came to take the fire. He came to bear it. He came to be rejected.

What does this mean? It means this is the secret to the change of identity. Do you see that it's not your enemies...it's not "the other"...it's not *them*...that deserve the fire? It's you. It's us. The whole lot of us.

In other words, you have to be melted and amazed and astounded by the fact that Jesus took the fire *for* you, and that's the key to everything else. You cannot change your identity without a radical experience of mercy, without a radical experience of grace, without a radical experience of love.

And therefore, once you've recognized what God has done for you, how can you not turn around and do it for others? This is why the highest ethical standard of the Christian faith – as demonstrated by the cross of Jesus Christ – it's *not* what you do with your sexuality...it's *not* what you do with your money...it's *not* how much service you give to the poor. Of course those are ethical standards. Almost every religion has those ethical standards. The Irish Catholics and the Protestants that were killing each other in The Troubles had those ethical standards.

The highest ethical standard of the gospel-centered Christian is **love of enemies**. Nobody else does that. Jesus does that. And Jesus tells *you* to do that. "Love your enemies." "Bless those who curse you." "Pray for those who mistreat you." "If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also." We don't like that. Doesn't matter. That's the deal. When I was single I didn't like the sexual ethics of Jesus. Didn't matter, they're still binding.

A lot of Christians in America today – especially in my particular camp – don’t like this ethic of enemy love. Plenty of voices around that sound more like the disciples than like Jesus. Last December a prominent politician – you may know him from the quote, but I’m not going to mention names, that’s not what this is about – but he stood in front of a group of young conservatives and said, “We’ve been playing T-ball for half a century, while they’re playing hardball and cheating. Right? We have turned the other cheek — and I understand, I understand, sort of, the biblical reference, I understand the mentality, but it’s gotten us nothing. Okay? It’s gotten us nothing. While we’ve ceded ground in every major institution in our country. Right?”

Wrong. But people are listening. I want to play you another clip. This is not from the movie. This is not from history. This is a local Colorado newscast from two months ago. [News 1:23] What kind of witness of the gospel is that church providing in it’s community? Even the news anchor knew what the Christian ethic should be. All religious violence is demonic. Don’t let the church building fool you. Jesus was murdered by the highest authorities of both the church and the state.

“But Anthony, you don’t understand, they *deserve* the fire! They’re *bad* people! We’ve got to *save* our country. God is on *our* side.” Congratulations, you sound like every authoritarian fascist who’s ever drawn breath on this planet. You sound like the partisan sectarians that tore Ireland apart for three decades. Children blown up by car bombs just walking home from school. You may even sound like the prophets of old.

What you *don’t* sound like is Jesus Christ. Who - when he had every right to call down fire - cried, “Father forgive them, they don’t know what they’re doing.” The sign of true growing gospel disciples is gentleness and mercy. This week we’re starting a small groups series in homes around the area on the inner life of Jesus, it’s called *Gentle and Lowly*. Does your inner life...does your outer life...does your political life...look like Jesus’?

I was going to play you a clip from the end of the movie. I was going to tell you about how the Troubles finally ended. How a coalition of brave Catholics and Protestants and atheists got together and said we have to respond to hate with love instead of more hate. I was going to share with you some alarming statistics about the increasing violent rhetoric in America by Christian Nationalists – not the majority of Christians to be sure, but there’s still millions of them. And with social media, their voice is louder than it was in Ireland in 1969. I’m concerned for the future of this country. The extremists are tearing us apart.

I was going to do a lot of things, but we’re just out of time. Too much history I suppose! I should probably do a series on this. But I have to land this plane. So let’s give Jesus the last word. Because after all, if you want to be a Christian, you have to follow Christ. No matter what your political leaders say. No matter what your religious leaders say – including me! What does *Jesus* say?

This is what he says in the Sermon on the Mount,
Luke 6:31-36:

“Do to others as you would have them do to you. 32 If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. 33 And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that...But love your enemies, do good to them...Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.

Let’s pray...